

JUNE 6, 1985

On the east end of the Shortgrass Country, jumbo grasshoppers are moving across the highways in big numbers. Jumbos, in case you aren't a grasshopper student, are the broad beasted variety that can eat grass so fast they make a hay baler look like it's stuck in reverse gear.

The only way they ever lose their appetites is from crawling across hot asphalt roads too slow and overheating their stomachs; however, once they've cooled out in the barrow ditch, they'll go right back on their feed and compensate for the amount lost while suffering from heat prostration.

As I was coming back from San Antonio the other day, I noticed also that the grasshoppers that had been killed on the highways were attracting the buzzards in that area. It was an orderly procedure. The grasshoppers were migrating in a southerly direction; the buzzards were working east on a lateral course.

Any bird that eats grasshoppers becomes a better flyer. I clocked the buzzards taking off ahead of my pickup versus the time they normally spend after a meal of ground squirrels and jack rabbits. The lighter crawl weight and extra nutrition from the insects gave the birds 56 seconds extra leeway to avoid my grill and windshield.

Farther south of San Antonio in the cow jungle, wide wingspread birds like vultures need to watch their body weights or they can't get back in the air on short runways. On a straight grasshopper diet, they're not only going to be lighter, but the more hoppers they eat, the higher they are going to jump in that crucial part of the take off when they have to watch for tree limbs and hidden guy wires.

Birds and flying insects seem to respond dramatically to their diets. When I was in Mexico, I watched the Mediterranean fruit flies that were training on avocado salad served at the hotel. Fat had accumulated under their wings until they flew like blue quail do here at the ranch: a sort of muscle bound, labored performance. In some areas ranchers spray for grasshoppers. Down here, weather failure usually takes care of any grass eating pests including the grasshoppers and even termites. I do need a stop watch to better check the roadways. I don't want to start a fight among the professional bird watchers, but neither so I want to miss out on any of the wonders of nature.